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By- Page, Ruth H.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF LOCAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION?

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Local school control will endure only if school boards can meet the needs of the future. Seven factors tend to weaken this control: (1) Ineffective board members, (2) ineffective superintendents, (3) teacher militancy, (4) public reluctance to support the school systems, (5) failure to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth, (6) federal government policy, and (7) public apathy. If these factors can be adapted to the changing conditions, local control will survive. The future role of the local board will depend on how well each member understands and performs his policy making role and on the amount and kind of support local citizens give to their boards and to those political bodies whose policies - largely financial - influence and effectively use teacher competencies without interfering with the public. (HW)

Phone 695-3469 (Area Code 609)

New Jersey
State Federation of District Boards of Education
407 West State Street, P. O. Box 909, Trenton, New Jersey 08605

MRS. RUTH H. PAGE
Executive Director

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF LOCAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION?

as delivered by

Mrs. Ruth H. Page, Executive Director

New Jersey State Federation of District Boards of Education

at the

AASA CONVENTION

on

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ROBERT R. LUSE
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MARK W. HURWITZ
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WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF LOCAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION?

I can recall a time when Englishmen said triumphantly, "There will always be an England." Surely there will be, but the England of today is a far cry from the Brittania who once ruled the waves.

I might proclaim there will always be a local board of education, but I cannot foresee whether the local board of the future will have the same significance in the government of schools that it has today. Like England, whose last great magnificence came in its determined and heroic defense of its shores in World War II before the entrance of the United States, so have local boards of education had their magnificent hours.

But we are never permitted in this life to spend long hours looking back, no matter how great our achievements have been. The vernacular expresses it more succintly by asking its benefactor, "What have you done for me lately."

The present questionning of the effectiveness of local control of education is not something new. It goes back at least thirty years to a period when many felt that local school boards should be abolished and professional educators should control education. At that time the critics felt the mayor of a community should appoint a superintendent to serve under him.

There was argument for this point of view. Education, it was agreed, is a state function. The state can use any agency available to perform a public function. Other educators, however, sprang to the defense of local control of education. They felt local school boards should be retained but improved in quality. To which, we would aid a ferment amen.

Political scientists have long advocated that schools be operated by superintendents under a city commissioner or city manager as part of a municipality. Most objections to this point of view are based on the fear that education would become prey to the fortunes of political parties. Even worse, it could become a kind of political plum tree from which a vast number of faithful workers could be rewarded through assignment to some of the many jobs open in the school system. Nevertheless political scientists cling stubbornly to the view that education is a part of government and should not be a separate entity in the municipality.

Local control of schools has been under constant surveillance and criticism at least since the advent of Sputnik, if not before. It has become clear to many of the public what a good many school administrators, teachers, parents and businessmen have long known. The schools are not uniformly performing the task of mass education.

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Indeed many critics have acted as if no education whatever has taken place in any of our schools in the last twenty years. While the situation is certainly not as bad as that, there is no doubt that the schools are failing to provide an adequate education, for one reason or another, for all too many of today's youth.

Many critics now feel that the reason for this is our traditional community support of schools at the local level under an autonomous board of education. They further feel that the need for an adequate education will be so much greater in the future that the task cannot be left in the hands of the local board.

It's interesting that this question of local control is being debated at the moment when the dichotomy of the present situation could cause a normal board member a mild case of schizophrenia. We are told that the evils and lacks of rural education are caused by local school boards. These boards should be abolished, the small districts consolidated into larger ones under a single board of education.

On the other hand the evils of urban education can only be relieved by decentralization of schools—by breaking the system up into manageable units under local boards with a great deal of power who would be responsible for the smaller units of the overall city districts.

It seems significant that our subject for today reflects two points of view—those who lean toward greater centralization of control over our schools—some want the federal government to adopt a general policy for schools—and those who want to keep them close to the people.

It is my conviction that local control and the local board of education should be subjected to the most thorough and intensive questioning imaginable. Although I have always been a firm believer and ardent supporter of local control of education, I believe it behooves none of us to support it on the basis of emotional conviction, unsupported theory or even on the basis of past performance.

Our need for evolving the best educational system possible and for assuring to each child the promise of his birthright to the degree that he can profit by that promise is so great that we must evaluate, question, criticize and prescribe for our future in the most careful, reasonable and objective way we can.

Among the reasons local control is again under critical scrutiny is the fact that education has been determined to be important in our national welfare and defense, and the federal government has entered the field on a more direct basis than ever before. A second factor is that there are now a number of direct challenges to local control, teacher militancy offering perhaps the most direct challenge.

I would like to spend a few moments looking at factors which, in my estimation, weaken local control and could lead to reducing the power of local boards to that of mere functionaries who lay cornerstones and hand out diplomas.

Chief among the factors which will weaken local control are ineffective board members. Now I must emphasize that no board member is ineffective just to be ineffective. The reasons a board member is ineffective are many but the chief ones are:

1. He does not understand his role
   He confuses policymaking with administration
   He involves himself with so much trivia that he is unable to stand off and take a critical look at the entire system and offer the superintendent and staff the balanced objective evaluation they have a right to expect.

2. He attempts to satisfy everyone. Thus he makes no effort to discriminate or to establish priorities in terms of the welfare of children.

3. He represents one segment of the community only, or he panders to the vocal minority.

4. He becomes an overzealous guardian of the tax rate and forgets that taxes are never popular and that failure to call for sufficient support of schools invites disaster.

5. He confines his activity to the local level and fails to insist that the state and the nation share in the cost of schools.

A second factor which weakens local control is the ineffective superintendent. He, like the board member, is not purposefully ineffective. He is so because:

1. He fails to give educational leadership to the board or staff or both. He continues the status quo and loses the respect of his staff and of his board

2. He leads in terms of what he believes people will accept rather than in terms of what children need

3. He doesn't rock the boat when searching old questions call for new answers

4. He invites boards to dabble in adminstation through his own sheer ineptness or through reluctance to give leadership to guide the board in its policymaking role,

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A third factor, not necessarily more serious than the first two but certainly the most dramatic of the three, is the present militancy of teachers. As we pursue those factors which weaken and erode local control, we cannot help but see that they are interrelated. Certainly the low levels of pay for teachers and the spectacular success of collective bargaining in some of our larger cities has led to the determined organization of teachers and to the demands which now include the broadest spectrum of subjects for bargaining.

I should note here that the competition between two great teacher organizations for membership has led to this broader definition of subjects for bargaining than has traditionally existed in industry. Each teacher organization is trying to outdo the other in the power it seeks for teachers.

It would be unfair of me to entirely blame local boards for poor pay for teachers if we did not also recognize that our present method of placing major responsibility for support of local schools at the local level and on the property tax severely limits school support. This reliance on the property tax is partially responsible for the public's reluctance to support the kind of school system our country and our children need. This failure of the public is named as still another failure of local control to get the kind of schools we need.

The failure of our schools to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth is a fifth factor, which can and does erode local control of education. Our society can no longer ignore the needs of these children nor the terrible conditions under which most of them live. If local boards cannot or will not cope with the situation, then some other agency must. At the moment the federal government is playing a leading role in urban education.

This interest of the federal government in education then becomes a sixth factor which eventually weakens local control. Federal money tends to shape and effect the curriculum in spite of efforts of some local boards to have it otherwise. Federal interest in improving conditions in the ghetto, in improving education of the drafted, in seeing that necessary positions in business, industry, science and other professions are filled will lead to even greater influences on local boards of education and possible erosion of their control.

And finally I would mention the apathy of the public as a factor in weakening of local control. I am grouping ineffective participation of the public under the general heading of apathy. People exert control by giving or withholding funds for support of education. They exert control by the attitudes they inculcate in the youth who attend school, in the demands they make on local boards. It takes an exceptional board to reflect other than the kind of school system the people of a community want.

I have listed seven factors which can lead to the reduction of local control in the period left of this century. Many feel these are reasons enough for ending local control. Taken by themselves, I would be inclined to agree that these factors indicate local control per se is seriously to be questioned. Nor do I think local control should be retained just because we always have believed in it or dor any of the reasons we were given in the past. Local control should and will endure only if it is viable enough and resourceful enough to meet the needs of the future.

I think it can. I will go further and say that I know of no other system that contains within itself so much hope for a meaningful future as does local control of education. But the local control that I see will be a far different one from that which exists today or has existed in the past.

For one thing, citizens will have to find ways to identify and elect their most able people to serve on their local boards of education. They will have to make clear that the opportunity to serve on a local board is one of the greatest opportunities that any community offers its leaders.

Citizens will have to go further than that. They will have to concern themselves with the interest in education candidates show who stand for election to state legislatures and the National Congress. Local citizens must understand that some of the break down in local control is caused by the failure of the federal and state governments to share in planning and supporting effective educational programs in every community. The best board in the world can't manufacture money. It can't raise taxes where no ratables exist. Citizen groups must see that the job is bigger than the immediate problem shows and should seek help where it can be given effectively—at the state and national levels.

Smaller school districts will have to be merged with others to provide a functioning unit which can offer a complete and varied program for its youth from their earliest days through at least two years beyond the high school. Education will be a big business venture with so much at stake that boards will maintain a complete staff of advisers and consultants as well as its regular staff for carrying out the school function. There will be close ties between school districts and the universities of the region, and boards will be kept abreast of research and their implications for the board's educational program.

Boards of education will function as directors of a well run corporation. They will see their responsibility in terms of setting goals for the school system, providing the means for reaching those goals and then evaluating the degree to which those goals are met. These are and should be the principle functions of a board of education, and not one of them may be neglected. It is the neglect of these

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functions—the setting of goals, the establishing of policies to meet those goals, and the evaluation of results—which has led to the hodge podge of many of our schools and of our local boards today.

Every state school board organization should see to it that its board members understood their roles.

Myron Lieberman and others believe we will have to have a national system of education before we can make our schools really serve the needs of our nation and its people. Dr. Conant thinks we can bring about a higher level of achievement among the schools of all the states through a compact on education among the states. I see the boards' staff of consultants, working closely with the university and the state and federal governments, as the means of keeping schools abreast with the times and needs and of stamping out flagrant provincialism. I see the superintendent in the role of dynamic leader, directing the continuing education of his board and initiating matters for policy consideration and development. Boards will act like policymakers if they are treated as policymakers.

I am purposefully staying away from all the arguments about local control versus national control as we know them today and am desperately casting about for good reasons for the continuance of local control aside from those we already know and believe in. I come back always to the point, that people support best that in which they have a part. Our government is based on that premise. Our democracy—in fact any democracy—is often times a pretty terrible way of getting things done, but neither you nor I would have any other.

I have heard people say, half jokingly, a benevolent despot is the best means of getting something done. Such statements are irresponsible. The conflict between youth and adults, between employer and employee—often between husband and wife and throughout history between a people and its ruler has been based on the desire for shared responsibility in government or decision-making at whatever level, or however formal or informal.

I cannot believe we can remove control of our schools from the people and expect the schools to thrive. Parochial educators are presently acceding to demands from parishioners for a greater say in schools. Big cities are mapping plans to give ghetto parents a say in the government of schools. No evidence can be produced to show that <u>in this country</u> and I underline those three words, <u>in this country</u>, that our schools will flourish if removed from the control of the people.

Now, it is true that just as boards are going to have to change their ways and lift their sights so must citizens. Years ago as a board member, dedicated to the use of lay committees, an active member of citizen committees and an enthusiastic participant in the 1955 White House Conference on Education, I groaned when President Eisenhower, following receipt of the report of his commission on National Goals, urged people to get out and work with their local boards.

Working with local boards means a variety of things to a variety of people. They need direction, they need information. We have already seen that ineffective citizen participation can be as destructive of local control as ineffective board members. And yet citizens are the ones who with the board should determine what our schools should accomplish. The setting of public policy must belong to the people. Charles Reeves in his book, School Boards, warns, however, "There are no permanent guarantees to the citizens of any unit that the powers they now have will be continued indefinitely. The people of a school district, a state, or the nation, are the stewards not the owners of their schools. Each generation of citizens must prove itself worthy of its stewardship."

Citizen organizations, PTA's, other community groups must recognize that the conduct of the schools is their great responsibility. Interest must not be confined to parent organizations only. All citizens must learn to participate in terms, not of narrow interest, but of the public good. For example they will have to learn and teach others to see that failure to integrate schools is a threat to all--aside from any individual hardships that might be caused. Although I did not mention it earlier, the failure of the civil rights movement can become the catalyst which ends local control of education.

The government must step in where local communities and/or the state fail to guarantee equal opportunity for all. Change comes about following new insight.. Research is just beginning to challenge long-held views concerning the education of minority groups. These new insights call for far-reaching changes. They go so far as to challenge school district lines and deep convictions about neighborhood schools. If local boards cannot win acceptance for changes or at least experiment with them, then another agency will be substituted for them.

Most people believe the Office of Economic Opportunity was, in effect, a substitution for local boards of education. Some local boards can argue with bitterness that money has been the root of their problems and when the money came it went to untried agencies. That may be so, but the fact remains that change must be brought about to make civil rights synonomous with all the people.

I was encouraged recently to see a whole issue of SATURDAY REVIEW devoted to statements of the interest that business and industry have in schools. The most recent issue of NATION'S SCHOOLS similarly had a supplement describing business's interest in solving some of the perplexing problems of the schools. It is high time that all segments of our communities involve themselves in the education of our youth. But citizen interest and concern for schools needs help and direction. This interest must be directed toward:

1. determining the goals of the schools: in brief, what do we want for our children in broadest terms of the welfare of the district, the state and the nation and in terms of the future, not the present or past

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2. deciding whether schools are doing the job—again not in terms of what Johnny or Suzy are doing nor in terms of what Mr. X Critic says they are doing, but in terms of scientific evaluation in which the staff, the board and the citizens play active roles

3. providing ways and means to help schools fulfill the roles the citizens, the board and its staff have outlined. And I repeat—such action must not be confined to the local district!

This brings me to the question of financial support of schools. I have said that inadequate support and over-reliance on the property tax have rendered local control ineffective. If local boards are to be effective, support of schools must be increased considerably and the base of it broadened. Someone has said the local community fishes for the tax dollar with a bent pin on a string. The state fishes with a fly rod, and the federal government with a net. Since this is so, every level of good will have to share an increasing burden to support the schools.

The question of federal aid is slowly fitting into a new perspective. I prefer Morton Grodzins' definition of our government. He says we should not think of it as a three-layered cake—local, state and national, but rather think of it as a marble cake. The federal government has concerns which must be served at the state and local levels. These two levels have interests and needs that merge or "marble" constantly with one another and with those at the national level. We should accept this interdependency and expect concern and participation on the part of all three.

The concern of federal control is one which must be continually before us—not to force us to reject federal aid but to encourage us to see that the community of interest demands a total sharing of responsibility to see that the job is one within an acceptable and workable frame.

I am purposely not entering into the effect national sharing in support of schools will have on church and state relationships. There undoubtedly will be many repercussions and possible changes in this relationship. It could lead to a remanding to local boards of some degree of control over private schools within the district, if only to require that private schools live up to certain standards if they are to receive federal funds.

This is not to say that I approve or disapprove of aid to private schools. I do not see aid to them so much as a threat to local control of schools as I see it a threat to the existence of public schools as we know them today.

If aid to private schools eventually becomes general, our public schools could become schools of the disadvantaged and our private those for the elite. The decision as to whether aid shall be made to private schools rests with the people, and it is one fraught with difficulty. I do not wish to go into it here.

I would like to spend my remaining time on the role of the superintendent and the militancy of teachers as they relate to local control of education. The spread of teacher militancy has been rapid. So rapid, the books written ten years ago fail to describe adequately our school system of today.

Earlier I suggested that timidity of local boards in the face of rising taxes was a partial cause of teacher militancy. As teachers win higher and higher salary and benefit concessions from boards, we can expect profound changes. It is quite possible that in the future bargaining—or negotiating if you prefer—will be done at a regional or at the state level. Dr. Lieberman sees it eventually taking place at the National level.

Experience in Canada has been that school boards have their state associations do their bargaining on a regional level. The government has not substituted for the board. Undoubtedly in our country, at least in the beginning, the pattern of conducting negotiations will vary among the states. If reorganization produces large enough districts, bargaining will be done on a district by district basis. If districts remain small, it will have to be done on a regional or state basis as one group after another postpones agreement to see what the neighbors settled for. I do know this, events in which human beings play a leading role seldom follow a predictable course. There are so many variables. The future relationship of a board to its teachers and the success of local boards in meeting original challenges and by the degree to which support for schools is broadened. By this I mean that it is quite possible totally new structures which will not erode board control will evolve out of the bargaining relationship. To mention just a few: there could be greater dependence on machines in teaching; the team concept might develop with master teachers receiving higher salaries; the use of teacher aides for a wider variety of programs or the development of a workable merit pay plan.

The only thing I can safely predict is that bargaining on a district level cannot continue indefinitely if all teachers are to be paid at the same rate with guaranteed built in raises. Some districts could not remain competitive. In order to insure adequate educational opportunity, the state or the federal govenment would eventually have to intervene and possibly bargain at a regional or a state level. This would, of course, erode board control in a very real sense.

I mentioned earlier that the teachers' demand to share in policymaking would affect the survival of local control. The NEA more than the AFT has insisted on teacher participation as co-equals in the development of policies that effect education. We, in the New Jersey Federation, feel that educational policymaking should not be subject to the muscle and militancy of the negotiating table. We believe boards should set up formal machinery whereby teachers are consulted on educational policymaking. The functioning

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of the machinery could become the subject of a grievance but not the educational policy itself.

We believe firmly that teachers should be consulted but that their suggestions must be evaluated in the light of the greatest good for the greatest number. The board must make the final decision for educational policy in the light of its goals for the district. To do this, it must rely on its superintendents' general knowledge of the district and the priorities which have been set in a well-ordered long range plan for improving the district's program.

Strangely enough in the dissatisfaction presently apparent over some school boards' discharge of their responsibilities, some critics are willing to award to the teachers the boards' traditional policy-making role. Teachers are the experts; therefore, they know the most about the subject.

Experts are not always sufficiently "general" minded to be able to make decisions wisely. They function better in the role of advocate. Furthermore, who is to say that teachers are uniquely favored in decision-making or that they even have the time or the interest to spend in the deliberation necessary? It could very well be that decision-making would be done by the officials of the teacher organizations directing teachers in ways calculated to show that the organizations were most effective in promoting the membership's interest.

Educational decision-making is not "too important to be left to the professionals." Its overriding importance is such that teacher competencies must be sought and heeded, but public policy-making must be left to the public.

In conclusion I would say that though there will always be a board of education, there is real question as to whether the board of the future really will govern the schools or whether its main function will be ceremonial. Its future role will depend on how fully each member understands his policy-making role and how effectively he discharges it; on the degree and the kind of support local citizens give not only to their boards but also to those political bodies whose policies—largely financial—dictate the degree to which boards discharge their duties. The future role of boards depends upon their ability to counter balance the growing power of teachers and to make effective use of teacher competencies without interfering with the best interests of the public and the boards' legal perogatives. The future of boards will depend upon the ability of the superintendent to administer schools effectively and on his willingness to exert his leadership to educate the board to what is needed in tomorrow's schools, to guide the board in the preparation of the policies needed to achieve the new goals. And finally local boards will survive only if they see that local control relates to the general good, that decisions cannot be made in terms of individual interest or even of a single community's interests—all decisions must be related to the general good and should be based on sound research.

There may be other ways to get done the job of educating our children besides through local control. I don't think it can be done with the creativity and the response to local needs that has characterized our efforts in the past. It is true that the future of local boards will be different, but if education is to flourish then it must be kept close to the people who must help prescribe the necessary change. Evidence that more and more groups are coming to realize this is already here.

Local control in the future will affect and be affected by all segments of our society, all levels of government and all interests. If man is our most precious resource and if education of the young is the key to our future, then surely control of education is the concern of all.

I, for one, welcome this belated appreciation of the importance of the job of educating our children. Such appreciation will demand the best from local boards. That is as it should be.

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